

Nola Peterson

From: "Tom Bus" <tombus51@yahoo.com>
To: "Citizen" <edit2@prestoncitizen.com>
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Water storage should carry users for a while, Barnett says

BY CITIZEN STAFF

The supply of water isn't exactly brimming over for users, these days, in Franklin County - but at least there is still some left. And no supplies have had to be shut off, yet.

That's unlike what's already happening in the Cutler Reservoir area of Cache County, Utah, where about 100 Small water users are facing an end to water for the season.

"The small amount that these 100 pumpers have is just a small piece of the big story, but for those individual pumpers around Cutler Reservoir, it is the big story," says Jack Barnett, manager/engineer of the Bear River Commission. "If it's your farm, your ranch, where you had to make mortgage payments, where you had to be shut off, that's the dominant issue."

That scenario isn't the case, he reiterates, for Franklin County and other Idaho users, he emphasizes. "They are still pumping and drawing down the lake (Bear Lake), as planned. In fact, it's coming down at a rate that everyone thinks will reduce. Because if they don't, the water supply would be gone in the middle part of August."

Barnett notes that "there are half a dozen accounts, they're being depleted at various rates. That is, the Bear River Canal Co. account may have more water saved in it than Say the Cub River account. The West Cache Canal is the first major canal that looks like it may be running out of water, which could occur in a very few short weeks."

But there is a silver lining, he continues. "The wonderful news is that things aren't as bad as they might have been as we've come through the summer. The first three weeks in June were a lifesaver after February and March were killers," due to a lack of precipitation in usually wet winter months.

"These storms that have been coming through here in the last 10 days have surely been helpful," he continued. "They have cut down the need for irrigation water, even if they haven't done much for the stream flow. Every day that we watch, is one more day, we just keep hanging on."

"And even though it might not rain on your field, the humidity's up a little bit, and it doesn't reach 100 degrees, it helps extend the water supply, the value that is to the crops," Barnett says.

He explained that PacifiCorp works with a half dozen contract holder accounts, the largest being Bear River Canal Co., in essence. The small pumpers, who pump directly from Bear River, total more than 100. Most are in Utah, and they are lumped together to form a total allocation.

"Those small pumpers each have an individual contract with PacifiCorp, but with respect to all of those allocations, but they recently organized into a formal group, and they are treated as a single entity," he says. No such group exists yet on the Idaho side.

"The water masters for Utah and Idaho are keeping track of the diversions, running the computer model, have advised PacifiCorp the small pumpers will have used their allocation out of Bear Lake by about this weekend (July 24-25)," he said of the Utah farmers.

"It is anticipated they will be notified, that as most of them around Cutler Reservoir in Cache Valley, when their storage allocation is gone, they will be then perhaps advised by the State of Utah they need to discontinue their pumping. That's the first of what may be a series of contracts, or group of contracts, that will run out of water."

The major canal companies, in the meantime, have managers on the phone twice a week to water officials in both Idaho and Utah, Barnett said. "PacifiCorp is keeping track of how much storage they have left. They're trying to manage their supplies so it will spread out into September. But at the current rate of pumping, some will run out in early August.

"At issue is, can they cut back on pumping now to stretch their water supply. One thing in their favor is that none of the farmers need to further irrigate their grains, wheat, so that could lead to some reduction in the amount of water they're going to need.

"For the most part, the farmers would like to irrigate their alfalfa again so they could get another crop," Barnett said. "Those who have planted corn need to irrigate until the corn matures. The other crop that comes to mind, is the potatoes, particularly in the Grace area, potatoes will require water into September."

As far as Bear Lake precipitation levels, he noted that, as of July 18, 806 second feet of water are being released from the lake, or about 1,600 acre feet a day. "As of July 13, they had released 33,521 acre feet. That means as of July 13, there was still available to be released collectively 50,272 acre feet. Each individual holder is going to have a different date.

"If they continued to pump at the same rate, collectively the system would be out of storage water in 31 days. The way you don't (cut off) in mid-August is you don't diver that much, so as to save some water," Barnett said.

He compared the current situation again to the 1933-35 year frame, when the lake continued to drop, even though 1936 looked to be a little better. "It was expected that 1936 would be the worst year. There is so much storage that can be accomplished at Bear Lake, but each year it has been declining.

"For us, 2005 is our 1936. In 1936, the lake was at record low levels, and we'll be at that going into 2005," Barnett said. "Even this year, we've been drawing on storage that's been accumulating over a long time. Now it's gone.

"We're predicting the lake will be at 5,903 when they turn the pumps off, it may be even lower. If next spring, PacifiCorp does not project the lake to reach a high of more than 5,094, then under the Settlement Agreement, no water is allocated to water users. No one is willing to predict that on pumping. It depends on individual companies and contracts."

Barnett said that he believes the Last Chance Canal Co. at Grace and Bear River Canal Co. in Box Elder County, Utah, will have some water "so they'll be in a position to ask for some pumping in September."

As far as being able to rely on any long-term forecasts, Barnett said "the probability of them being right that you could do any storage planning based in their forecast, it's just a notion of what the future will be.

"In 1936, we were looking at a bleak year, the spring remained very cool. It started to rain in July and August. It rained a lot, the results were a very small amount of water being taken from Bear Lake. That started the recovery. Even though '36 looked to be very bleak, it turned out to be a good year, was the start of the recovery.

"We need something like that this winter and spring, to kick this back to being no carryover to somewhere that we get sufficient, so that the big reservoirs can give us benefit, like Bear Lake and Lake Powell," Barnett said.

Barnett also works with Colorado River supplies, and said conditions there are every bit as bleak. The issue with the Colorado, the reservoirs have been a little bigger, it'll be another two years of withstanding a drought before they would be at the same level with large reservoirs. On the Colorado, the power generation is already way off."

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